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Downtowns, Past and Present

Claire Poitras

In the last two decades, analysts of urban change have focused on the evolution of metropolitan areas that have increasingly taken the form of “fragmented mixtures of employment and residential settings, combining urban and suburban characteristic.”¹ Edge cities, edgeless cities, exurbs, boomburbs, metroburbs, development corridors, and nodes represent a new phase in the history of the city. As new office buildings have been rising in suburban downtowns or edge cities, former city centres have undergone major shifts in their form and function. Although most Canadian cities maintained thriving downtowns throughout the twentieth century, retail and office decentralization has affected the economic health of city centres. Initially, what attracted businesses and people to downtown? How did downtown evolve from being the city’s principal magnet to a business district among many others? What types of urban revitalization efforts were carried out and what were their outcomes?

Since the middle of the 1990s, North American urban scholars have looked at the ways in which downtown areas have recovered after years of decline and neglect. Building on evidence regarding population growth² and major investments in the entertainment and cultural sectors,³ scholars have shown that downtowns have rebounded. Moreover, even though many observers of the urban scene have predicted their extinction due to the increased use of communication technologies, in the last decade or so, architectural icons of downtowns and city centres such as skyscrapers or tall buildings⁴ have reappeared in the urban landscape. The idea to devote this special issue to the developments that have transformed downtowns was in many ways in response to the nature of contemporary urban challenges. In the latter half of the 1990s, urban studies have focused on the renewal of downtown cores. These studies have shown how new urban activities and new players have replaced those that had defined the heart of western cities since the end of the nineteenth century. Thus, the traditional functions of the central business district represented by the head offices of major corporations, financial institutions, large department stores, or entertainment centres have given way to residential units, new shopping malls, and facilities designed for cultural and tourism activities.⁵ For their part, historians have also highlighted the transitory nature of the exclusive character of downtowns as they developed at the turn of the twentieth century.⁶

Planning for this special issue revolved upon the initial premise that, despite their diminished function and declining role in contemporary urban life, downtowns have maintained a certain specificity of form and function. However, since the end of

the nineteenth century, this individuality has been subject to constant renewal. By emphasizing the importance of programs and policies—and their underlying discourses—that have been carried out in downtown areas throughout the twentieth century, many historians and urban scholars have supported this hypothesis of a specificity constantly under renewal.⁷ While senior levels of government in Canada and the United States have contributed greatly to the expansion of the suburban way of life by financing the construction of road and freeway networks, access to private property ownership, and the provision of public services, particularly in the area of education, their involvement in the revitalization of downtowns has also been far from negligible.

Presentation of Papers

The papers in this special issue all deal with the city during the period following the Second World War. This new context—that saw the emergence of new players, as well as the proliferation of unique challenges associated with redevelopment and de-industrialization—corresponded to a major transformative phase in the role of downtowns, as well as in their physical shape and underlying ideals. Downtowns were beginning to lose their importance relative to the entire metropolitan area, through the decentralization of commercial and industrial activities. At the same time, thousands of square metres of new office space were being built in glass and steel skyscrapers. During the past few years, urban history research has produced a number of works on the decades following the Second World War and this is reflected in the papers appearing in this issue. This period corresponds, to some extent, to a second modernity, to borrow Ulrich Beck’s expression,⁸ that shows up in force in urban areas that are increasingly influenced by metropolitanization. This second modernity relates to the reformation of the first modernity that occurred in large industrial cities during the nineteenth century. Simply put, during this period, modernity was itself modernized.

The retrospective approach of historians highlights a key period in the history of urban agglomerations that saw the population of the suburbs become more important. After the Second World War, a resident of an urban area who did not work in the city centre had almost no reason to venture downtown, given that banks, cinemas, and major stores all opened branches in close proximity to their clients’ place of residence. The demographic shift had major economic and political impacts on city centres and downtown areas that, undergoing yet another

transformation, saw an increase in socio-spatial conflicts. The players in this phase grew in number and voiced their opposition to the transformations underway and their consequences. Thus, the paper by Betsy Beasley reveals how the city centre and centrality are experienced in a very specific way by New York University students who proclaimed their right to the city, to borrow an expression from Henri Lefebvre.⁹ This reinterpretation of the student movement of the 1960s and 1970s highlights the importance of the local origins of protests organized by students in downtown Manhattan, in conflict with pressures from urban redevelopment and the resulting socio-spatial inequalities and unrest. The student movement can be linked to new social movements that grew out of the need to express social concerns over the quality of life in the city. The events studied remind us of the perpetual nature of urban conflict and encourage us to consider the role of universities as key players in urban redevelopment.¹⁰

Charissa Terranova's paper takes us to the American Sunbelt. Studying the pedestrianway system put in place in Dallas to counteract the decline of the city's core, the paper raises the issue of pedestrian movement in the city and the necessity of finding durable solutions to congestion in downtown areas. According to traffic experts, it represents a pathology that continues to endanger the functionality of city centres.¹¹ Describing the systematic vision of urban designer Vincent Ponte, the paper revisits a theme that twentieth-century urban scholars and traffic experts hold dear, that of managing the flow of movement. The optimism and idealism associated with the subterranean pedestrian network as a structural element in the downtown core are tempered, however, by the simultaneous development of sub-centres. Moreover, the author reveals that there are limits to the promised transformative features of urban design.

The papers by Fabrizio Maccaglia on Palermo and Seamus O'Hanlon on Melbourne analyze more recent revitalization strategies of city centres. In Europe, the reality of city centres is linked primarily to that of historic centres, the notion of downtowns being typically North American. Thus, in Palermo new strategies designed to revitalize the historic centre have involved the reform of local political institutions. A twofold identity rebranding was implemented, relying on one hand on creating a new image for the historic centre and on the other hand on regaining control of a space once ruled by the Mafia. This symbolic reinvesting in the historic centre with its concentration of hundreds of historic monuments was also accompanied by a program of architectural and urban rehabilitation. In Australia's second-largest city, the revitalization strategy was based on the organization of large sporting and cultural events. No longer playing a central role in the narrative of nation-building, cities are now subject to the hazards of interurban competitiveness—at times occurring between cities in the same country—as Hank Savitch and Paul Kantor show in their book, *Cities in the International Marketplace*.¹² Melbourne's example reveals the new challenges of this competitiveness, which can be seen in cities like Glasgow and Montreal that were also affected by

deindustrialization or the decline of manufacturing activities in the central city.¹³ Plagued by social problems generated by industrial decline, public authorities have had to refocus their actions to renew the image of the city on the international stage.

In conclusion, Margaret Rockwell's photographic essay on Hamilton, Ontario, forcefully reveals the impact on the urban landscape of demolition and reconstruction projects carried out during the renovation of the downtown core in the 1960s. Long the prerogative of socio-political analyses of cities in the 1960s and 1970s, urban renewal projects are now studied by urban historians.¹⁴ This paper reveals what happened in several North American cities when plans called for economic activity to be redistributed around the service sector in city centres. The result was the reconfiguration of the urban fabric and the expansion of transportation networks to facilitate the construction of huge buildings to which thousands of office workers would flood. The point of view analyzed by Rockwell is that of the dominant players on the urban development scene with their uncritical approach to the future of a city, including the place of the pedestrian and the role of the street as public space.

By focusing on recent transformations of city centres, this special issue provides a brief glimpse of approaches favoured by urban researchers. It reveals the vitality of the historical view of cities and its convergence with other analytical perspectives from the disciplines of urban planning and social sciences. The papers highlight both the plurality of the players involved in the transformation of urban environments and the complexity of the revitalization. In all cases, the city centre is a place where socio-economic and political groups exert their influence. In a few years, historians will undoubtedly study the most recent phase of downtown revitalization in which the social and functional mix of urban spaces, the democratization of planning and development, the pivotal role of culture in economic development, and the spectacularization of architecture are the indisputable components of new intervention models. And then, in time, we will have an even better understanding of the transnational nature of the dominant traits unique to downtown transformation programs.

Notes

1. Paul L. Knox, *Metroburbia, USA* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 2.
2. For the American case, see the report published by the Fannie Mae Foundation and the Brookings Institution in 2001: Rebecca R. Sohrmer and Robert Lang, *Downtown Rebound: Cities, Demographics, Community Development* (Washington, DC: Fannie Mae Foundation and the Brookings Institution, 2001).
3. Elizabeth Strom, "Rethinking the Politics of Downtown Development," *Journal of Urban Affairs* 30, no. 1 (2008): 37–61.
4. See, for instance, the special issue on tall buildings of the *London Journal* 33, no. 3 (2008).
5. Larry Ford, *America's New Downtowns. Revitalization or Reinvention?* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).
6. Robert M. Fogelson, *Downtown: Its Rise and Fall, 1880–1930* (New Haven:

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- Yale University Press, 2003); Alison Isenberg, *Downtown America: A History of the Place and the People Who Made It* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2004).
7. Carl Abbott, "Five Downtown Strategies: Policy Discourse since 1946," *Journal of Policy History* 5, no. 1 (1993): 5–27; Robert A. Beauregard, *Voices of Decline: The Postwar Fate of US Cities*. 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2003); Elizabeth Strom, "Rethinking the Politics of Downtown Development," *Journal of Urban Affairs* 30, no. 1 (2008): 37–61.
 8. Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Society* (London: Sage, 1992).
 9. Henri Lefebvre, *Le droit à la ville* (Paris: Anthropos, 1968).
 10. At the 2008 American Urban History Association Meeting held in Houston, papers addressed the tensions raised by the expansion of university campuses in central cities. Scholars have also analyzed the role of universities as developers. See, for instance, David C. Perry and Wim Wiewel, eds., *The University as Urban Developer: Case Studies and Analysis* (New York: Sharpe, 2005).
 11. Sabine Barles et André Guillerme, *Gestion des circulations : seculum miserabile* (Paris : Centre d'histoire des techniques, 2003).
 12. Hank Savitch and Paul Kantor, *Cities in the International Marketplace: The Political Economy of Urban Development in North America and Western Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).
 13. Claire Poitras, "La nouvelle économie à la rescousse des métropoles industrielles. Analyse comparée des stratégies publiques à Montréal et à Glasgow," *Revue internationale d'études canadiennes* n° 5 (printemps 2003) : 149–171.
 14. Kenneth Jackson and Hilary Ballon, eds., *Robert Moses and the Modern City: The Transformation of New York* (New York: Norton, 2007).